

Planning for a better Durham

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Facing down a \$15 million budget gap for the next fiscal year, Durham is moving forward with codifying its first-ever strategic plan.

The plan has been in the works since last summer, and the city is currently expected to complete and unveil the plan early this summer. Run through the City Manager's office, the strategic plan will incorporate multiple existing department-level strategic plans.

"This is the first step," said Jay Reinstein, strategic initiatives manager in Durham's Budget and Management Service department, adding that he devotes about 30 percent of his day-to-day work to the planning process. "[The plan] will really guide how we conduct business and how we guide resources and the annual budget."

Although the plan is still being constructed, the city completed and released its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges survey of Durham employees, citizens and institutional stakeholders Feb. 12. The SWOC survey asked respondents their opinions on a broad swath of city issues, ranging from the state of Durham's transportation network to internal communication between departments.

The survey will lay the foundation for the plan itself, according to a Durham news release. In addition to the four SWOC categories, respondents also offered their take on what the city's priorities should be.

The timeline for the strategic plan, which is posted on the city's Web site, expects that implementation will begin in September, even though the city budget for the 2010-2011 fiscal year is set in June. City Councilmember Diane Catotti, however, said mid-fiscal year adjustments in January may allow the city to implement the plan without waiting a year before the next budget cycle.

"I don't know if the plan will change [City Council] operations that much. It's a really good process, but it's more of an enhancement," Catotti said. "We are not waiting to make operational changes. If there are efficiencies or adjustments we can make now, we are all for them."

The recession

Catotti pointed to some recurring issues like poor local transportation infrastructure that may require significant investment and thus would need to be incorporated into the budget next June. Both citizens and city staff listed public transportation and old infrastructure in the SWOC survey as major challenges facing Durham.

Although expanding the transportation network and repairing deteriorating streets are laudable goals, they at times need to be moderated by the realities of city governance. Given the current recession, projects involving significant operational costs will need to be considered in the context of the city's resources, Catotti noted.

"It is obviously making all of us very mindful of our constraints," she said. "Constraints are not new. We have not had adequate resources to address all the many needs and concerns, so you always have to prioritize. I think what the strategic plan does is that it focuses very clearly on what our priorities are, given limited resources."

Although Durham has generally survived the recession better than other cities in North Carolina, the poor economy has been a factor in the development of the plan, Reinstein said. A comprehensive strategic plan will help the city focus the annual budget and put in place accountability mechanisms to ensure that resources are used effectively, he added.

“I think everything is just going to have to be slower [with the recession],” said Evan Covington-Chavez, residential development director at Self-Help, a community financial development organization and a stakeholder included in the SWOC survey. “We won’t have a quick pace getting anything accomplished.... There will probably have to be some prioritizing.”

City Manager Tom Bonfield, however, said he does not think the recession will affect the implementation of the plan. The plan will be more useful in guiding the city’s priorities as the economy recovers and the city nets new tax revenue, he said.

“We know that the rate of growth in new revenues—whether it be sales taxes or property taxes—is going to be substantially slower in Durham than we’ve experienced in a long, long time,” Bonfield said. “To spend those dollars, we need to have a strategic plan.... The plan isn’t necessarily going to say, ‘Here are the new projects.’ It’s more setting the direction of priorities.”

What came before

Bonfield said he saw a need for a comprehensive strategic plan after talking with the City Council and city staff when he came to Durham in mid-2008. Bonfield previously worked as the city manager of Pensacola, Fla.

“There was a sense that we in Durham have seemed to kind of react to issues and bounce from issue to issue and not stick with a plan,” Bonfield said. “From my general experience and knowledge, the organizations in local governments that do have a strategic plan are more successful. Just across the board, that’s fact.”

Previous attempts to create a city-wide strategic plan fell short of completion. In 1998, the city manager’s office collected data from citizen and stakeholder surveys, but did not have the necessary support from city leaders to create a full-fledged strategic plan, Reinstein said.

But with Bonfield’s arrival in 2008, and with support from Mayor Bill Bell and the council, all the stars aligned to facilitate the creation of a comprehensive plan.

“Personally, I think the strategic plan should have been implemented earlier, because it helps make sure the decisions you make in any area are held accountable,” said Councilmember Farad Ali. “Right now, this is allowing us to be more forward thinking in recognizing that we’re building the foundations in the strategic plan for councils in the future.”

Duke’s involvement

To gather data, the city employed the help of Zelos Consulting, a firm specializing in government and nonprofit organizations, to solicit opinions from more than 380 staff members and all 25 department directors, according to the SWOC document. Additionally, 204 citizens and 18 institutional stakeholders were polled for their thoughts.

Although Duke was one of the 18 stakeholders, the University did not return its survey in time for the SWOC document's publication, Reinstein said. The responses from the four stakeholders who responded in time are included in the document.

"It's been slow," said Phail Wynn, Duke's vice president for Durham and regional affairs, referring to the response rate of the top administrators and deans to whom Wynn distributed the stakeholder survey. "Only a quarter of them have sent me back anything. But what has come in so far has been generally positive."

Recent downtown revitalization, including the development of the Durham Performing Arts Center, was a common point of praise among administrators and deans, Wynn said.

He added, however, that crime and security concerns remain an issue among the ten or so Duke officials surveyed. Wynn said that given the University's role as the city's largest employer, he expects to see Duke featured prominently in the strategic plan when it is unveiled to the public.

"What I am trying to do is to broaden and deepen Duke's role as an advocate in working with the city on these key issues," Wynn said. "We on the Duke side know what the city's main concerns are, but the city is also interested in Duke's concerns."

With a yawning budget gap and diminished prospects for revenue growth, strategic planning may not necessarily present ambitious new projects to invest in. Rather, the plan will likely modify the priorities of multiple city departments so they are all pointing in the same direction, so that when growth returns it will be managed effectively, Bonfield said.

"To me, it's one more tool in the toolbox," Catotti said. "We always knew we weren't going to solve these problems overnight."

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